Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1936.

COUNTRY LIFE

Skating

In the flat meadows of a Midland valley, just before Christmas, with hoar like silver sugar on everything, skating seemed like the finest pastime in the world. When nearly all sports have become commercialised or cheapened or even embittered by publicity, skating remains a supremely friendly, social, beautiful thing, to be enjoyed for its own sake, without snobbish membership of clubs, absurd correctitude of dress or rules, uneasy rivalry or class distinctions. It stands at the other end of the scale from hunting, a democratic and friendly affair, as against the class narrowness of the meet. To skate easily round the track, in the almost red December sunshine, to meet friends, to stand quite still and take great breaths of ice air and stare at solitary bird-flights above the sugar willow-trees, and finally to skate off again with fresh wind is to experience some kind of exhilaration that no other sport and no other country pastime can give. It stimulates the mind in a most wonderful way, so that there seems to be more smiling and laughter on a stretch of ice than anywhere else in the world. The glumness of a Test Match or the mannered heartiness of a hunt meet become pathetic beside the gaiety on the ice. And, this year, skating in fog was a new and almost weird experience, the skaters like ghosts, the rime-bearded grasses and sedges at the marsh-edge like strange ferns in some phantom ice-age, the echoes of skates and laughter strangely magnified. It is this sound of skates that to many skaters is the most beautiful and exhilarating thing of all: the clear musical cutting of steel on fresh ice that carries so far on the quiet winter air. And, hearing it again after too long an interval, one longed for those fabulous frozen winters of country life in another century, when frosts were—reputedly—terrific, and men put on their skates by firesides and struck off from house doors for frozen rivers.

* * * *

The Love Apple

"A tender annual; of long trailing growth, producing bunches of large round berries, which are used by the cook and confectioner, as an ingredient in soups, as a pickle, and as a preserve."

This description, taken from *Abercrombie's Practical Gardener*, 1823, hardly seems at first sight to fit the modern tomato, of which 54,000 tons were produced commercially in this country in 1931–32. The year 1823 has some significance, however, for it happens to have been this very year when the tomato's value as a fruit was being recognised here. Although the earliest European reference to it had been by Matthiolus, in his herbal of 1554, and the first recorded cultivation of it in this country by Gerard in 1596, the fruit seems to have found nothing but disfavour until Sabine championed it in 1822. Matthiolus called it *Mala aurea* and *Pomi d'oro*, apple of gold. Almost all pre-twentieth-century horticultural manuals call it the love apple. Today nearly 4,000 acres of commercial glass-houses are devoted to its cultivation in Great Britain alone, and the import total of 1933 was 145,150 tons. All estimates of the home-grown total must be rough, if not even speculative, since no possible account can be taken of the poundage produced by every owner of a garden fence. To those owners and to all in fact interested in the cultivation of the tomato the Ministry of Agriculture's *Pamphlet No. 77*: *Tomatoes* (1s. 6d. net) ought to be invaluable. It deals authoritatively with every aspect of the plant's cultivation, from sowing to gathering. It recommends, incidentally, the use as a fertiliser of dried blood, a compound which fed, last summer, some of the choicest fruit I have ever seen—fruit which, moreover, kept perfectly till Christmas.

* * * *

Plough Monday

This year Plough Monday will fall on January 6th, which is also Twelfth Day. The occasion, remembered and celebrated regularly in my boyhood only twenty years ago, belongs, now, to the long category of vanishing country festivals, though it survives in the eastern agricultural counties, where boys still blacken their faces, dress in white and collect coppers by singing some local form of the traditional mumming ditty:

"Think a poor plough-boy,
Give us one ha'penny.
Coo—oome!"

The day originally marked the end of the Christmas holidays and the return of the ploughmen to work, and the plough used in the procession was called sometimes a fond or fool plough, since the procession was fond or frolicsome and not serious, and sometimes the white plough, since the mummers were dressed in white. Mr. David Garnett has a description of the ceremony in, I think, *Go She Must*, in which those who give nothing to the mummers have their door-steps ploughed up. I have never otherwise heard of this, nor in fact have I ever seen the plough itself play any part in the procession. In recollection I see only what were for me the terrifying black faces of boys who were not plough-boys, all dressed in make-shift white smocks and carrying turnip-lanterns, and any mummery which survived even twenty years ago was quite unconscious, and any meaning which Plough Monday still had had long since been commercialised. Originally there was also a queen of the subsequent banquet, but in my recollection there was no banquet, a celebration which would in any case, I think, have been too tough for most queens.

* * * *

Flower Colours

A correspondent to a gardening paper has been complaining of the lack of artistry and intelligence shown by compilers of catalogues. It is often necessary, he complains, to compare the remarks of half a dozen nurserymen before he can decide whether a plant is white or mauve or pale blue, whether it grows 3 or 5 ft., and whether it flowers in June or August. Most gardeners will sympathise with him. Miss Jekyll complained bitterly of the colour-blindness or colour-stupidity of those responsible for the descriptions of asters, one of her favourite flowers, though she disliked the pink and magenta varieties. It was the white and the smoky shades of mauve and purple that she liked so much and which were all-important in the scheme of her famous grey border in late summer. Exactitude in colours was everything to her, and a scheme could be ruined by a nurseryman who knew no difference between purple and mauve or between mauve and blue, and finally she did no ordering of asters except during the flowering season, when she could trust to her own perfect eye to separate the most delicate shades and calculate their ultimate effect. Blue and scarlet seem to make the average nurseryman drunk, so that anything of washy magenta or vermilion becomes Scarlet Beauty or Scarlet Glory, and anything of mauve or purple becomes Heavenly Blue or Azure. As all gardeners know, there are precious few blue flowers, and almost as few scarlet, but no doubt it is profitable sometimes to improve on Nature. Nevertheless, I have never yet, in spite of catalogues, seen a good blue phlox or a scarlet lupin, and Sidalcea Scarlet Beauty, seen in the grounds of a famous nursery last summer, flaunted chalky magenta spikes that were a disgrace to the raiser and an insult to a charming family.

* * * *

Botanical English

Reginald Farrer, who let a good deal of fresh air into the various academic departments of horticulture, vigorously attacked the humourless use of that odd jargon, botanical English. The value of a recent treatise on the genus *meconopsis* was ruined for me by the inordinate use of this stupefying lingo, and the current issue of the otherwise delightful *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* loses much of its bloom for the same reason. The following reads like an extract from some horticultural *Work in Progress*:

"*Receptacle* (ovary) subcylindric, 1.5-2 cm. long, *Calyx* orange-scarlet, campanulate, ventricose, 1.5-2.5 cm. long; *lobes* triangular-subulate, strongly recurved. *Corolla* adnate below to the inside of the calyx tube; lobes subulate, at first connivent, afterwards recurved. . . . Fruit oblong—obovoid or almost clavate. . . ."

I must add that all this applies to a charming and rare plant, *Gurania malacophylla*, from the Upper Amazons. Its flowers, though one would not guess it, are rather like orange hyacinths, and the fruit exactly like green miniature silk-haired marrows.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE*

Swan for Dinner

At least one distinguished novelist has eaten an unusual Christmas dinner—a swan. The bird—whether a cob (male) or pen (female) I do not know—was very large and from all accounts very good. The flesh seems to have been like goose, but lighter, more delicate. After having seemed a little fishy while cooking it later turned out, roasted and stuffed with chestnuts, to be well worthy of Chaucer's famous praise of the bird. All of which recalls a very different episode related in masterly fashion by Hudson. It concerns the cooking of a heron, Hudson having met the two daughters of a man who had cherished a lifelong ambition to taste that bird. For years his daughters had put him off, but finally Hudson relates how he procured a bird and ordered it, tyrannically, in spite of all protests, to be cooked. And cooked it was, with ghastly results. The flesh turned out to be hideously black, fishy and uneatable, the daughters were almost poisoned, the countryside was fouled by a stench as of many diabolically ancient fishshops, and at least one person was cured for ever of a desire to eat fish-loving birds. Swans are, I think, presumed to be the property of the King and of certain Companies such as the Dyers and Vintners Company, the royal swans being marked with five nicks, two lengthwise and three crosswise, on the bill. Peacocks are another matter ; and there is on record the charming story of a girl who, while shooting, innocently mistook one for a pheasant. But it was a shallow excuse, since neither peacock nor pheasant was hers to shoot anyway.

* * * *

Grass Drying

Something like a revolution is going to take place in English grassland farming if the problems of drying grass for winter fodder are finally and successfully solved. It has been known for some time that grass cut at the height of a few inches and dried by hot air or particular gases will retain far higher nutritive values than hay, the dried grass retaining almost the qualities of fresh grass. Experiments have already shown that a drier introducing gases at 250 degrees C. does no harm to the grass, that the grass keeps its colour well, and that there is a singular decline in the feeding value of grass from May to the end of June, albuminoids and fats declining by about a third. Even the layman must see what this means : that a grazier may, on good land, by judicious cutting and feeding, obtain a production of highly nutritive young grass throughout the summer instead of a single crop at a time when the feeding values of the material have greatly fallen. Such a yield might very well double the value of land. Estimates made by a committee of the Agricultural Research Council put the production cost of a ton of raw material at about 40s., and the value of a ton of dried grass, as compared with current prices of other foodstuffs, at about £6 10s. What now seems to be needed most of all is a cheap small-scale plant to do the job. If it comes, and if grass-drying in this country proves a success, we may very well see summer fields like lawns and hear the clack of the grass-cutter from June till September.

* * * *

Willows and Osiers

The total area of willows and osiers under cultivation in England has declined by half in ten years, and stands now at something like 3,000 acres, of which more than half are in Somerset. The introduction of all sorts of substitutes, Chinese sea-grass, cane in split or pulp form, fibre and so on, has been largely responsible for it, but the competition of foreign rods, in spite of a decline in imports since 1930, has also helped. There has been a large decrease in importation from Holland and Belgium, but a large increase from an unexpected country, the Argentine, one-year-old Argentine rods apparently attaining a greater length, without a corresponding increase in diameter at the butt, than those grown elsewhere. Polish and Silesian rods have also increased. The four chief varieties grown here, *Salix triandra, S. Amygdalina, S. viminalis* and *S. Purpurea*, have produced some attracting named varieties : Black Hollanders, Glib Skins, Pomeranians, Spaniards, Brown Merrins, Dicky Meadows, Long Skins and Dark Dicks, which read rather more like the characters out of piratical romance. As to cultivation and cutting, this is another case where, as with sweet chestnut, everything looks very pretty, but is in reality very expert. Cultivation is something more than the mere planting of sets in marshy ground, and cutting far more than the mere hacking off of leafless rods. The time of cutting depends entirely on the treatment which rods are subsequently to undergo : so that rods for "buffing," or buff colour, are cut as soon as the leaf has fallen, rods for "brown" not until the whole leaf crop has fallen, and rods for "white" not until early spring. Standing osiers and willows have always seemed to me among the best of trees in winter. But it was not until December that I saw such a plantation of bloody orange as flamed up by the side of a small Kentish mill : in the late afternoon the rods seemed to be covered with a kind of fiery varnish, so rich that they seemed to give out a tawny blood-shining light in the falling darkness.

* * * *

A Census of Birds' Nests

Looking up an old number of *The Countryman* I find one of those obvious, simple queries which occur to all of us when someone else has thought of them first. "How many of us know within 10 per cent. the number of nests in any given acreage of English countryside ?" The writer is suggesting a census of nests, his purpose being to test a statement by a firm of bird-seed suppliers that the mortality among young wild birds every year is 80 per cent., a figure which he doubts. He goes on to detail a bird-map, made for his purpose, of a garden of ten acres, the site containing 67 nests. One at once sees the value of such a record, since nothing fades more quickly than last year's spring and the detail of its nests unless it is last year's summer and the detail of its flowers. If we make and keep plans for herbaceous borders why not plans for fields and the nests in them ? A plan might resolve itself into a five-year plan : so that the increase or decrease of birds might be tested, the partiality of birds for certain sites, the incoming or disappearance of rarer birds, the use by certain species of almost the same site over and over again. I cannot remember, for the life of me, how many nests I discovered last spring. It would vary from twenty to forty, perhaps, every afternoon I went out. The species have got mixed up. I know there were a great many chaffinches. Many odd wrens. A particular cirl-bunting's. I could mark, perhaps, fifteen or twenty sites. The rest are forgotten. A map—it would be a delightful pastime for all children—would not only have recorded them all but would have formed a working plan for the coming spring, the excitement of which would no doubt have been doubled in consequence. In short, the idea of a census of bird's nests seems to me just as worth carrying out as the recent census of starlings. Perhaps more.

* * * *

Poaching : Old and New

Civilisation threatens many rural figures, but not the poacher. He survives and flourishes in a world which has long since annihilated the smuggler. I may be pardoned, I hope, for a profound admiration for the true poacher, a survivor of a wilder life, the sole remaining example in these islands of the hunter who is also hunted. He carries on a craft which needs insuperable courage and cunning and which is often pretty poor in its rewards and harsh in its penalties. I am not so sure of the modern poaching upstart, the gent who now brings his lorry to country lanes and picks up, by the hundred, poached game for the town. This new type of mechanised poaching is now quite common, and the possibilities of turning it into a racket, gangster fashion, seem to me considerable. The snag would come with the intimidation of solitary poachers, and I like to speculate on its chances of success with an old poaching acquaintance, who has just died. He used to take his wife with him. She seems to have been a lean little woman, like a ferret, tough as hawthorn, and she went wherever he went, which might be twenty or thirty or even forty miles, by night, in winter, and was ready, like him, for anything. He himself was a man of fifteen stone, a bruiser, and it must have been a good sight to see them working together, he so big, she no bigger beside him than a dog. And she deserves, I think, the record of his verdict : "A good gal. And as good a hand as I ever worked wi'."

H. E. BATES.

* Sir William Beach Thomas is on a visit to South America. He will resume responsibility for this page on his return next month.

COUNTRY LIFE

Country Customs

When I wrote, a fortnight ago, of " the category of vanishing country festivals " it did not occur to me that I could fill this page, and another, with even brief descriptions of the feast and festival days, now obsolete, which must have been commonly kept in the childhood of our grandparents. Since then I have been able to gather some notes on about thirty customs. Unfortunately not all are complete enough to be included here, and some, such as Pancake Day and Oak Apple Day, need no description by me. But what of Clipping Posies, Duck under the Water, Largess, Lowbelling, Valentining, Possessioning, Booting, Dyzemas Day, Mop, Riding and Stattis? These read like the quips of an Elizabethan clown, and to most of us will mean about as much. Yet in the last century they must have been a fixed and cherished part of country life. And many of them, if they are completely dead at all, must have died out quite recently. The distribution of largess is commonly remembered. Possessioning survives under its better-known name, Beating the Bounds. Of the rest Valentining and Mop are certainly observed; Valentining in the Eastern counties, where children still beg for coppers on Valentine's Day, with a song:

" Holly and ivy and tickle my toe,
Give me red apple and let me go."

And Mop, or Mop Fair, certainly survives, particularly at Boston, in Lincolnshire, and is still a great day there. Mop is roughly synonymous with Stattis, a corruption of Statute, in turn an abbreviation of Statute Sessions, established by Edward III in 1351. Both Stattis and Mop came eventually to mean an annual fair or gathering for the hiring out of servants to new masters, the difference being that Stattis comes before Michaelmas and Mop after. Every Hundred in England originally had a Stattis, with attendance of magistrates, to solve the servant problems. Later the attendance of magistrates ceased and the fair grew up, an occasion of rejoicing and a chance to buy a new rig-out. My own grandfather regularly attended a great Stattis at Kimbolton, in Huntingdonshire. Today, at Boston, servants are still said to buy new clothes on Mop Fair day. But what no longer survives, and what must have once coloured the whole Stattis scene delightfully, is the wearing of emblems of service, the shepherd carrying his lock of wool, the cow-man his tuft of cow-hair, the carter his whip. And whether the rest of these odd customs survive at all or not, they go to prove at least one thing: that country life in the past was not quite so dull as this age is apt to think it. Nor quite so circumspect. Take the ceremony known as Riding. The wife who wore the trousers got no change out of Riding, in which two men, one dressed as a woman, rode in a cart to the house where the husband was henpecked and went through a satirical mimicry of female persecution, the woman walloping the man with a basting ladle. And discontented married couples could hardly have been sweetened by the custom known as Lowbelling, where a crowd of neighbours turned out, rattled ironical tin cans for their benefit, and gave them the contemporary equivalent of the raspberry.

* * * *

The Village Hall

Village life, indeed, can hardly ever have been so stereotyped and in that sense so dull as it is today. Of the three great pillars of pre-War village life, two—the church and the big house—have been badly shaken. The pub. alone, thanks as much to the townsman as anyone, keeps its place. It is a place that must, however, have been challenged, if only a little, by the post-War rise of the village hall, an erection which, incidentally, has often outdone the corrugated iron chapel in its depressing ugliness. That there is no need for this unimaginative village jerry-building—which has, I suspect, too often been the result of the notion that village folk " wouldn't appreciate anything better even if it were put up "—was emphatically proved by an admirable article by Mr. J. W. Robertson Scott in the *News Chronicle* recently, in which he described an almost Utopian village hall just completed in the Cotswolds, a fine building in local style and stone, with bath-rooms, sports changing-rooms, concert hall and so on. Now comes the news that the National Council of Social Service is prepared to grant financial assistance to villages which desire to build halls. The scheme embodies a free grant of one-sixth of the total cost of erection, with a maximum of £350, together with a loan of not more than one-third of the total cost, with a maximum of £500. This means that if both loan and grant are approved the village itself must raise, in cash, one-half the total cost of erection; if the grant only is made, the village must raise the whole of the balance. Loans are made free of interest, and special loans, also free of interest, are available for the improvement of existing village halls. This is the mere outline of a scheme which ought to give a great many villages something to think about, and full details can be obtained from the National Council of Social Service, 26 Bedford Square, W.C. 1.

* * * *

Preserving the Coast

In their love of country the English are occasionally responsible for some crazy paradoxes. Thus, for centuries much has been sung, written and otherwise declaimed in praise of the English coast and sea, from the patriotic lyricism of poets down to the bombast of politicians. Yet, according to a qualified authority, only a fraction of the coast-line of these islands is owned by the National Trust and preserved for the nation in its natural beauty, and the very part of the country which ought to be a national heritage and pride is in fact at the mercy of the speculating jerry-builder. Already parts of the Sussex coast and the unique coast-line of Romney Marsh from Hythe to Winchelsea have long been ruined by atrocious vandalism. Parts of the Essex coast are a disgrace to a civilisation whose language contains the words " preservation " and " beauty." Neither the Essex nor the marsh coast is remarkable for cliff scenery and magnificence of views, and it is the cliff coast and its preservation which has been interesting Dr. Vaughan Cornish, whose excellent paper *The Cliff Scenery of England and the Preservation of its Amenities* has just been issued in pamphlet form. On the assumption that out of a total coastline of 1,800 miles about 500 miles is cliff of not less than 100 feet, Dr. Cornish estimates that the total cost of preserving the English cliff coastline for the nation, on a basis of £100 an acre, would be only £2,000,000, a moderate enough sum, and even more moderate in comparison with the proposed L.C.C. expenditure of £35,000,000 on slum clearance. And what, one may well ask, has the preservation of cliff scenery to do with slum clearance? To which Dr. Cornish replies: " The project for slum clearance and that for national parks ought to be envisaged together as complementary parts of one great movement for saving England from what is mildly termed undue urbanization, a condition that is to say in which the towns are not fit to live in and the countryside not fit to look at." I do not need, I think, to comment on this spirited passage, except to repeat that the English are, sometimes, masters of the art of destroying what they most profess to love.

* * * *

The Virtues of Walnut

There is a shortage of walnut; and since the wood is excellent for gun-stocks, Mussolini, apparently, is responsible. It is hardly likely that the Duce will see these notes, but it is interesting, nevertheless, to reflect that the tree has some other and not inappropriate virtues. According to Culpepper: " if they (the leaves) be taken with onions, salt and honey, they help the biting of a mad dog, or infectious poison of any beast." And according to a nineteenth-century herbalist: " The green rind in decoction is administered with great advantage to patients who labour under imbecility." But neither these virtues nor Mussolini himself have any place in the sober little pamphlet of half-a-dozen pages just issued by East Malling. This is an account of the result of walnut research there, and it reveals the depressing fact that out of a large collection of nuts from widely different English sources less than 1 per cent. were of a satisfactory standard of quality. This is largely due to the prevalent planting of seedling rather than named varieties, and all varieties in this country are apparently hopelessly mixed. But no doubt Italian trees, having a nobler destiny, are better disciplined.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

Skokholm

Skokholm is a remote island of 240 acres of rough grass and heather and sea pink and bracken off the coast of Pembrokeshire. I mention this because there may still be lovers of wild life who have never heard of it or its owner, Mr. R. M. Lockley, who for the past eight years has attempted—the word is his own—to farm the island by grazing sheep on it, and who has succeeded instead in establishing a bird observatory there and the first migrating bird-marking station in Britain. The story of Skokholm is one of the most fascinating in the history of English bird life and observation. How he took the island, transported his sheep there, fought a plague of rabbits, became engrossed in the rich bird life of the place and finally erected in his garden there the first bird trap of its kind in Great Britain, the Heligoland type for bird-ringing purposes, has already been described by Mr. Lockley in innumerable articles and some excellent books, and it is not for me to take the story out of his mouth. This bird trap, however, very much concerns the readers of *The Spectator*, for it was in response to an appeal by Sir William Beach Thomas on this page that a " sum slightly exceeding the £21 17s. 10d. expended in the purchase and carriage of the materials for the new trap " was contributed in the summer of 1935. This trap was duly erected in the August of that year, and was an instant success. Birds of many kinds at once began to be caught in it—white and yellow wagtails, Greenland wheatears, chiffchaffs, stonechats, snipe, meadow-pipits, rock-pipits, Manx shearwaters, spotted fly-catchers, redstarts—and were duly ringed by Mr. Lockley and enthusiastic friends. The work of trapping and ringing has gone on ever since, and Skokholm has now become as important in its way as Heligoland and a place of pilgrimage for many bird-lovers, who are accommodated and fed on the island at a charge which is " necessarily such as to cover the considerable expenses of catering under unusual circumstances, and the cost of the upkeep of the present buildings."

* * * *

An Appeal for It—

The concluding words of the foregoing paragraph are Mr. Lockley's own, and they are the real point of these notes. So long as Skokholm remained Mr. Lockley's private amusement there was no question of it being helped or supported by public subscriptions. But it has already become something more than a private amusement. With two exceptions, it is the only Bird Observation Station in Great Britain fitted with the Heligoland trap, and it has long since become a place of intense interest for all interested in the habits of birds at all and of rare migrants especially. Skokholm, therefore, is entitled to outside support. It does not get it. At least it does not get it from the source from which it might reasonably expect to get it, namely the Ministry of Education, which has recently withdrawn its contribution to the study of economic ornithology. This is in significant contrast to the attitude of a nation often condemned today on the count of barbarism—Germany, whose Ministry of Education finances the Heligoland station and maintains a scientifically equipped and staffed observatory there. And it is immensely to the credit of British enthusiasts that they have ringed as many birds as the Germans have done at Heligoland. This, of course, makes nice reading—but what of the cost? Rings alone, used by the thousand in Skokholm, are responsible for a formidable item of expense. And ringing must be recorded in record books; books in turn must be housed; observers must be sheltered and fed and given congenial buildings in which to work; a new and more up-to-date trap, on a new and superior site, is needed. Mr. Lockley has asked me to announce, therefore, that the Skokholm Bird Observatory Fund, inaugurated on this page by Sir William Beach Thomas, is still open. It is not only still open, but very urgently in need of far bigger funds than were previously subscribed. Mr. Lockley is warm in his thanks to all those who responded to Sir William Beach Thomas' appeal, but clearly the Observatory is now in need of far wider support. The future of Skokholm as a bird observatory depends indeed upon the enthusiasm and generosity of the public. The smallest subscription will be welcomed, and donors should address Mr. Lockley at Marloes, Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire, crossing their cheques or orders " Skokholm Bird Observatory Fund."

* * * *

—And one of its Problems

Mr. Lockley has another problem, and, as it happens to be a problem facing many more countrymen than himself, it seems well worth a note here. Ever since he took Shokholm in 1927 he has been at war with rabbits. In 1927, the island swarmed with them. It still swarms with them. During his first winter on the island Mr. Lockley employed traps and by the end of January he had trapped something like three thousand rabbits. Within two years, in spite of all trapping, there were more rabbits than ever. On Skokholm there are no natural mammal enemies such as stoats or weasels, and the old country adage, which is also scientifically true, " that the more you kill them the faster they breed " was borne out absolutely. Then Mr. Lockley made the unpleasant discovery that the traps were trapping not only rabbits but his own precious birds, and the traps went. The subsequent snares, ferrets and gas proved just about half as effective as the traps, and finally in 1934 Mr. Lockley, defeated, hired a steam tug and barge and removed his entire flock of sheep from the island. The rabbits are still there—at least 6,000 of them, in Mr. Lockley's own estimate. Chemical control, inoculation, specially trained ferrets, gas attacks and so on have all failed. The problem is not only Mr. Lockley's. If there are 6,000 rabbits in Skokholm, how many are there in Great Britain? Supposing they were not rabbits, but rats? We should demand legislation, Government control and the papers would be full of it all. Yet the destructive powers of the rabbit, as any grass farmer and in fact any cottage gardener will bear out, are at least equal to those of the rat. But the rabbit gets off. It not only gets off, but it even gets protection. No animal ever needed it less. And it seems quite time that the rabbit was deprived of its privileges and ranked, as in Australia, as a pest of the first degree. No doubt keepers, who generally regard the rabbit as a pretty good source of on-the-quiet income, would oppose this. But not Mr. Lockley, who is still crying aloud for his effective remedy. Nor his fellow sufferers.

* * * *

Fox and Sheep

I had not seen a fox, an English fox at any rate, for months. The last I had seen at all had been in France, somewhere between Rheims and Nancy. And then, coming down a Kentish lane, I saw what seemed to be a dog, a red setter, among a flock of sheep. But curiously the flock was taking far less notice than it would have done of a dog. There was no panic or scuttling or silly flocking together; only a casual uplifting of a head or two and a momentary staring of wooden faces as the fox came downhill across the field, as saucy and quiet as a backyard cat. And he came right down among the sheep, extraordinarily brilliant against their shuddered wool, before anything happened at all. And then it was I who upset both him and the sheep together. I shifted my ground a little and he saw me instantly. He stopped at once and the sheep looked up a second later. And there we stood, for almost a minute, sheep and fox staring at me as the intruder, the sheep with silly reared heads ready to bolt, the fox sublimely casual and arrogant. Until suddenly he loped off again, taking his own time, threading his way among the flock with all the sauce in the world, disappearing finally into the copse, the sheep taking no more notice than if he had done it a thousand times before.

* * * *

Wigs

Thanks to many correspondents, I have been able to discover what wigs are; and thanks particularly to the charming generosity of a lady correspondent in Dorset, I have been able to taste them. The wig is a species of tea-cake. It seems to have been made in the past in Hampshire, with a flavouring of caraway seeds and honey; in Shropshire, also with caraway seeds and sugar; in Herefordshire and Scotland; and is still made today in Kendal. The Kendal wig, which I have tasted, is either plain or flavoured with sultanas or lemon peel, and is garnished with sugar. It is, it seems, always oval in shape, and is delicious.

H. E. Bates.

COUNTRY LIFE

Bitter Weather

January has lived up to a bitter reputation. In both 1684 and 1740 the Thames was frozen in January. In 1768 Gilbert White records that the year " begins with a fortnight's frost and snow " ; in 1770 there is " frost for the first fortnight " ; in 1771 " severe frost until the last week in January " ; in 1772 " to the end of the first week in February, frost and snow " ; in 1773 " the first week in January frost ; thence to the end of the month, dark rainy weather." And so on, the same story down to the year 1792. In 1814 the Thames was frozen over again in January. In January, 1907, W. H. Hudson was in West Cornwall, " where the cold became intense, and that rare phenomenon in West Cornwall, a severe frost, began, which lasted several days, and was said by some of the old natives to be greatest frost in forty years." Back to White : " the first week in January (1776) was uncommonly wet," to be followed on the seventh by " snow during all the day, which was followed by frost, sleet and some snow, till the twelfth, when a prodigious mass overwhelmed all the works of men." An earlier winter, 1768-9, provides a near parallel to the present. The autumn of 1768, like the autumn of 1935, was exceptionally wet, six and a half inches of rain falling in some places in September alone ; and White in turn could draw another parallel—" the terrible long frost in 1739-40 set in after a rainy season, and when the springs were very high." From all this he makes the deduction " that intense frosts seldom take place till the earth is perfectly glutted and chilled with water, and hence dry autumns are seldom followed by rigorous winters." All of which is very interesting in view of our own recent winters, the dry summers of 1932, 1933 and 1934 having all been followed by soft winters. But this winter has still far to go before it equals the terrors of 1776, when there were 32 degrees of frost at sunrise on January 31st at Selborne, and the Thames was so frozen over " that crowds ran about on the ice " and the cold so " penetrating that it occasioned ice in warm chambers and under beds."

* * * *

First Signs

As far as White could judge, Selborne was colder during that frost of 1776 than any other place in England. This year the south in general has escaped, and while there were deep snows in the Midlands and the North and skating in Lincolnshire, many valleys south of London were green or only freckled with snow. At the same time the Downs were white, and on Sunday, the 20th, the snow line, lying at about 400 feet, was as straight and clear as though drawn with chalk and ruler. In the valleys the frost has touched nothing, and things seem already as advanced as in 1935. The hazel catkins were long and soft by the 13th, the day before what has traditionally been known as the coldest day of the year. By the 12th primroses in open copses were out. Snowdrops were already out, aconites had followed them, and on the 16th I saw such a colony of dog's tooth violets as I can never hope to see again : many hundred parasols of dark rose and pink, rampant as celandines, with chance aconites shining among their marbled leaves. By the 17th wild violets were out. Dog's mercury was already common. Lords and ladies were up, brilliant as green glass. An odd crocus or two had a *pencil-tip* of yellow. And all the time, through the frost and in spite of it, there was an unmistakable rising of passion in the thrushes' song before daylight. It had an amazing clarity in the bitter dark morning.

* * * *

Farmhouse Holidays

The word farmhouse is one of the pleasantest in the language. No doubt there were days when farmhouses were farmhouses simply, but the amazing post-War re-discovery of the countryside has brought about some changes, so that the word is now, to say the least, a little elastic. A farmhouse may now be anything from a farmhouse to a roadside shack, from the small-holder's cottage to a guest-house. The word is stretched to cover a multitude of sins. I mention this because it occurs to me that there may be lovers of the countryside who contemplate the pleasure of a farmhouse holiday. They may have been stimulated by stories of houses run by benefactors whose mission in life it is to feed the jaded guest with an unlimited supply of the tenderest chickens, brimming bowls of cream, fruit straight from the farmhouse bough and all the home-made comforts of a perfect country house at a couple of guineas a week. But things are not always what they seem and there are, alas, farmers' wives who cannot cook and even farmers' wives who are not farmers' wives at all. I write this out of the bitterness of experience. I will not describe the farmhouse; it defies description, on this page at least. I cannot describe the roasted chickens, the succulent ducks, the peas that melted in the mouth, because there were none. Nor the swimming bowls of cream, the cakes as light as love, the home-baked loaves, the cream cheeses, for the same reason. I could describe the farmer's wife, because she remains indelibly imprinted on my mind as being as slovenly and dirty as the house itself. And I can describe the empty tins from which we ate our only peas and fruit and which, before the week was out, were piled as high at the back door as our smashed illusions. I pride myself on an unstinting admiration for the English farmer and his house, and I have no doubt that there are many farmers' wives who take in guests with credit to themselves and pleasure to all concerned. But clearly the word farmhouse can exercise a dangerous hypnotism.

* * * *

Striped Tulips

Of all flowers grown in this country the tulip seems to have the longest record of popularity. It is essentially a civilised flower, a shape cut out of satin, and it looks perfectly at home in the small villa gardens of today. " Wee had it first out of Turkey about fifty years since," wrote Sir Thomas Hanmer in 1659, " where it grows wild in some parts, particularly about Jerusalem as they write, and is thought to be that flower translated ill a lilly, which was sayd to bee more gloriously arrayed than Solomon." It was then the hey-day of striped tulips : " Wee did value in England only such as were stript with purples and other redds, and pure white." And Hanmer gave earnest instructions for their cultivation : " I know in Paris one of the ablest florists there, who had got a great deal of money by Tulipes, and hee assur'd mee hee chang'd his habitation every third or fourth yeare in Paris because of his Tulips, which hee found infinitely better'd by varietyes of aire as well as Earth." Striped tulips, so often seen in paintings of the Dutch school, have rather gone out of fashion, but they were still popular a hundred years ago, and *The Floricultural Cabinet* gave directions for their cultivation which were almost as earnest as Hanmer's own. They were " as is practised in Flanders by the greatest artists," and ran : " Take the plaister of old walls and powder it very fine ; mix this with drift sand, or such sand as is sharp, and found on the sea shore ; to this add of the water that runs from Dunghills or lakes, and mix these as well as possible, and put it over the surface of the bed a little before you plant your Breeding or Plain Tulips, and it will make them break into stripes to a wonder, as related to me by a gentleman of great honour." A far simpler way, in my experience, is to grow a few Bizarres among " your Breeding and Plain Tulips." All the dunghills in the world could not produce such a splash of stripes, crimson on white, gold on bronze, scarlet on yellow, as develop in a year or two.

* * * *

A Friendly Covey

A friendly covey of partridges on the lawn every morning throughout the winter has been a pleasing sight. The fat feathery dumplings incessantly at work in the grass have contrasted pleasantly with the occasional arrival of a cock pheasant, who can find nothing better to do than preen his stuck-up feathers on the pergola and squawk a murder at every movement of stoat and man. There is something very much of the English earth about the partridge. Earth-coloured himself, he tones more easily and completely with earth than almost any other creature. And unlike the pheasant, he is lovable. So that I look eagerly every morning for the covey of dark brown heads working like clockwork hammers in the wintry grass.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

The Provocative Fox

The fox is still the most interesting and by far the most provocative of English wild animals. He has some quality of arousing the passions that none of his fellow creatures comes anywhere near to possessing. We despise the rabbit and show a mild culinary interest in the hare. The otter and the badger would excite us more if we saw them more often. But the fox seems to be regarded as everyman's common possession, exciting us all to anger or admiration, according to circumstance. Recently the *Countryman* opened its columns on the question of fox-hunting. The result was a crack of impassioned fireworks that could not have been surpassed if the question had been one of cruelty to children instead of cruelty to foxes. I do not propose to drag up the ancient question of cruelty here, but clearly there is an extra flash of character in an animal that can arouse human passions as much as " Charley " does. It has often been suggested that the fox, but for hunting, would long ago have gone the way of the bear and the wolf. I am not so sure of this. What I am sure of is that no other animal extant in this country could replace the fox. Apart from beauty of appearance, traditional cunning, great courage, and so on, he has an extra touch of something somewhere, an indefinable flash of something, not quite nobility but almost, that makes him fascinating and admirable—always providing one isn't a poultry-farmer.

* * * *

Foxes as Hunters

Which brings me to the point of these remarks—the question of the fox as a hunter himself. My own note on foxes and sheep has brought an extremely interesting batch of fox notes from a Glamorgan reader, who gets a great deal of pleasure from fox-watching. " It is," he very truly remarks, " always a pleasure to see foxes when they are not being hustled. . . . On my early morning expeditions in search of wild duck on the ' splashes ' in frosty weather I have several times seen a brace of foxes working together. One goes along the river bank and the other keeps about a hundred yards out and drives a moorhen in towards the river down the irrigation ditches. They work as cleverly as sheep-dogs. . . . The two I saw last week were not working together—indeed it might have been the same fox, so quickly do they travel without apparent effort. The first I saw was loping along the bank on the opposite side of the river—a fine red dog-fox in splendid coat. When he saw or—more likely—winded me, he slipped up into a hedgerow and sat down on his haunches, displaying his white chest and white-tipped brush to great advantage. When I made a slight movement, he vanished without moving a twig in the undergrowth. Later I was walking along the railway-line while my companion walked the bracken beside the river to try to get me a driven shot at an old cock pheasant. The golden retriever was working between us. I noticed a wisp of snipe get up wild, and then the small birds in the little brake below the line flying up into the trees and chattering. Then I saw a hen pheasant legging it across the metals, followed by what I thought was the dog. A train was coming, so I shouted to it to go back, when to my amused surprise I saw it was a fox again, steadily following up the line of the running bird." I wish space would allow me to quote the rest of these reminiscences : they are full of colour and life and a genuine admiration, almost love, of the fox.

* * * *

The Rabbit Plague

By contrast, my note on the Skokholm rabbit plague has brought nothing but the bitterest condemnation of rabbits. No one has a good word for them. The only good word I have been able to come across at all, indeed, is by Gilbert White, who declared that there was no turf on earth so soft and close as the turf cropped by rabbits. On the same day as my note appeared a correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* went so far as to suggest a rabbit week, on the lines of the already established rat week, an idea I warmly applaud. Now a correspondent from Yorkshire comes along—driven to desperation by a garden in which every shoot has been devastated—with the suggestion that gardeners might consider the growing of plants which are extremely distasteful to rabbits and so drive them off. Rabbits, I fear, take more driving off than this, and there is no guarantee, in any case, that distasteful plants will lessen a rabbit's appetite for wallflowers, pinks, the shoot of iris reticulata and ericas, of which they are passionately fond. The problem, maddening though it is to gardeners, is really larger than this. And readers who are plagued by rabbits, either in gardens or on open land, may like to comfort themselves with the following figures. They are simply the official figures for rabbits imported into this country from Australia, New Zealand and certain European countries. The figures are in hundredweights. On an average reckoning there are 25–30 rabbits in a hundredweight. The figures are for 1933 : Australia, 434,299 ; New Zealand, 35,755 ; Italy, Netherlands and Belgium, 18,665. Roughly a million rabbits a year, therefore, come into this country from Australia alone. My only comment is that the Ministry of Agriculture, like higher authorities, sometimes moves in a mysterious way.

* * * *

New Seeds for Old

The new seed catalogues are out. They flash and flame, as usual, with many so-called novelties, among which the sweet pea again takes the biscuit. New pink shades or new blues or new scarlets, lavishly illustrated, are offered at fancy prices. I try hard to discover how they differ from last year's pinks and blues and scarlets, which were also offered at fancy prices and which were also, at that time, " the best pea it has ever been our good fortune to raise." This craze for novelties has reached absurd proportions, and one of the best-known plant-collectors in the world has rightly observed that whereas a nurseryman may make a fortune out of a new sweet pea or a new daffodil, a plant-collector, after risking his neck on a Himalayan precipice, is lucky if his genuinely new plant is grown by half a dozen enthusiasts. The craze for something new often means, too, that many lovely and familiar plants are gradually superseded and drop out. The botanical magazines of a century ago are full of illustrations, then called embellishments, of fine plants, beautiful species and hybrids, now completely forgotten. A black ranunculus, a splendid double crimson pelargonium, a black auricula, many beautiful bizarre carnations—they were then the craze. Who grows them now ? The number of species grown in these islands is now something like 12,000 and is rapidly increasing. There seems no need, therefore, for this ramp in novelties. Not that this will interest the fashionable nurseryman. He is a psychologist first, a plantsman second. The public craves for change and, if it can get it, for something that the next-door neighbour hasn't got. Novelties, indeed, flourish wonderfully on the dunghills of jealousy.

* * * *

Redwings, Fieldfares and Starlings

A Yorkshire correspondent reports a flock of redwings in a town garden. " Six or eight in the flock, and most of them contented themselves with holly berries. A more daring member, however, came two days running to sample the scraps scattered in our own garden for more normal visitors. On the third day they came in a body to our Pyracanthus creeper, but suddenly they disappeared and have not turned up since. At the same time another observer reports a scarcity of fieldfares and, very surprisingly, of starlings. Though certainly, when one thinks of it, the starling flocks seem to have been of no great size this winter, at least since December. If there is a scarcity, and it is dangerous to rely on hearsay and memory, then it becomes a more astonishing thing than a shortage of rooks or sparrows. Of fieldfares there is certainly a scarcity. In my childhood they were as common, almost, as peewits. We called them felts. They made fine grey flocks on the winter land, feeding. Yesterday I asked a boy who might be called the crack bird-observer of his village if he had seen any fieldfares at all. He opened a mouth like an egg. Both fieldfares and redwings are among winter visitors here, and redwings, at least, suffer much from cold—the reason given by my Yorkshire correspondent for the sudden appearance of the flock—and so no doubt do fieldfares, the two being closely related. But this would not account for a scarcity of fieldfares over a period of relatively mild winters.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

The Elusive Otter

Although I lived the first twenty-five years of my life between two rivers, mooching about their banks on every possible occasion throughout the year, and although I still live by a river in which there is otter hunting, I have never had the good luck to see an otter. Not a glimpse or shadow of one. I may, through ignorance, have missed dozens. I can't tell. I only know that I would give my hat to have had it otherwise. The otter experiences of a Welsh correspondent, the same whose notes on foxes I reprinted last week, are therefore very interesting to me, as I hope they will be to those country lovers who, like myself, have been unlucky with otters. Here is a man who rides with hounds regularly, glories in it but who has sense and sympathy enough to put himself occasionally in the place of the hunted. And if his otter experiences are less complete than his fox experiences it is undoubtedly the fault of the otter and not of him. There is no doubt that otters are extraordinarily elusive. My correspondent speaks of two which "were hunted for six hours last season and got away. The scent floating downstream from the otter above drew the hounds from the hunted one. Better," he adds shrewdly, "to be hunted than trapped." Another observer speaks of an otter lying over the Severn on the out-hanging branch of a willow, almost perfectly camouflaged, ready to strike. My Glamorgan correspondent declares that an otter will beat the hounds time after time, and there is on record, I believe, the amazing story of an otter which half-ripped a pack of hounds to pieces. Otters glory in deep waters and this bitch, pursued by hounds, took to a lake, the dogs following. The otter vanished. Following, the hounds let out successive yells of anguish. The bitch, coming up under water, had ripped every belly open.

* * * *

Their Breeding and Food

My correspondent goes on to regret bitterly the summer hunting of otters. "If it is true," he says, "that otters breed at all times during the year, an accident of this sort cannot be helped, but I should like to see authority for the statement." Can any reader of *The Spectator* give it? He is puzzled, too, about the diet of otters, suspecting that they live mainly on eels and less on fish than fishermen suppose. But according to some nineteenth-century annotations to White's *Selborne*, otters are not only piscivorous but carnivorous as well. They are there reported as eating ducks and teal and, while in confinement, young pigeons. It would be interesting to know what diet Mr. Henry Williamson devised for that tame cub which he used to take to a west-country market by car and which was, presumably, the original of Tarka. Otters also eat frogs and, according to the annotations in White, mussels. "Numbers of mussel-shells have been found in an otter's haunt, with the ends bitten off, and evident marks of teeth on the broken fragments, the position of the shells indicating that the otter, after having crunched off one end, had sucked or scooped out the mollusc." But reliable information about the otter is, like the otter itself, very elusive. Am I correct, for instance, in referring to otter young as cubs? Should it be kittens?

* * * *

Trees from Seed

Every gardener who reckons himself a gardener at all grows some plants from seed. If he is ambitious he gets his alpines that way; if he is patient as well he gets his bulbs, his lilies and gladioli and even his rarer crocuses. But what of his trees? Most of us, when it comes to trees, like a quick effect. We pay for it. Even a short hedge of *cupressus macrocarpa* costs a pound or two. What about the prospect of one for twopence? This *cupressus* comes readily from seed and in nurseries when its cultivation is specialised the little nine-months-old trees look like lines of carrots. From that stage they grow with great rapidity, and at a growing rate of three feet a year—and sometimes it is much more—one has a fine hedge in less than five years. I reckon the cost, twopence, on the catalogue price of a well-known nurseryman, who offers a hundred seeds at that price. I should call the *cupressus* a moderately easy tree to grow in this way. All brooms and most berberis and cistus species and buddleias are even easier. Brooms never seem to do half so well as when grown from seed, potted up at an early stage and planted out at a height of a foot or eighteen inches. In that way they may attain a height of eight or ten feet in a couple of years. Berberis are slower, but even in infancy they colour beautifully in autumn, the little soft-prickled leaves spotted with blood and orange. The only real risk, and it attends most seed-sowing anyway, is that named varieties are unreliable. But most seedsmen now offer mixed hybrids of a great many trees, and the gamble is a good one.

* * * *

For the More Ambitious

But the appetite of the ambitious gardener is insatiable. After a time brooms and cistus and berberis begin to seem like child's play, and he hankers after something more dazzling and difficult. Today there is nothing to stop his trying out his most ambitious fads. Seeds of hundreds of rarer trees and shrubs are available at modest prices. Many varieties of clematis are available—most of them a little slow in germination, but by no means as slow as many alpines—and many species from California, Japan, New Zealand and the Himalayas. The list is doubled if one includes greenhouse shrubs. The Acacias, the yellow-flowered mimosa, and the andromedas, beautiful winter-flowering shrubs with delicate white flowers and glossy leaves, begin the list. I like the seductive possibilities of Albizzia Julibrissin, the Silk Tree, which follows them, with pink acacia-like flowers, and the so-called blue spiraea *Caryopteris mastacanthus*, which is certainly good. A fine Californian, *Fremontia Californica*, with glorious yellow flowers, is available, and a whole list of ceanothus. I treasure a Japanese nutmeg, *Leycesteria Formosa*, a good shrub with maroon and white pagodas of flower, which I have from seed, the seed sown not by me but by a chance bird. A very fine catkin-tree, *Garrya Elliptica*, flowering in winter, is easily obtained, and the Snow-drop Tree, *Halesia carolina*. Rhododendons, like the ceanothus, make a whole list, and then a good many solanums, mostly a little tender, with soft blue potato-flowers that are charming on a south wall. The list, in fact, goes on farther than I can pursue it. And for those who like the notion of growing trees and shrubs from the Empire I recommend Lady Rockley's book on that subject. It contains information on some astonishingly beautiful species, of which seed is often obtainable in this country or from collectors in New Zealand and elsewhere.

* * * *

Food for Pigs

In a recent address to the Farmers' Club, Sir John Orr is reported to have said that "four and a half million people in this country spend on an average only four shillings per head per week on food." I have no means of confirming this statement, but I am extremely interested in the following suggested rations, given by an expert journal, for pigs. For fattening pigs a good winter ration is "3 parts by weight of maize meal, 3 of barley meal, 2 of brown pollards, 1 of red bran. To this add 2 or 3 pints separated milk or buttermilk per head daily. If milk is not available 1 part of extracted soya bean meal should be added to the mixture given above and 2 lb. of a mineral mixture to each cwt. of meal mixture." For sows with litters the proportions are slightly varied, but "if separated milk or buttermilk is available, the soya bean meal may be omitted." For in-pig sows, "4 parts by weight each of maize meal, brown pollards, and red bran." The pig, in short, is in clover, and although I cannot remember which Caesar it was, if it was a Caesar at all, who drew attention to the fact that a nation which pampered its animals invariably neglected its people, it is only fair to state that the same journal prints an admirable article on *The Restricted Rationing of Pigs*. It has been discovered that "if pigs at the rapidly growing stage are supplied with inadequate diet a stunted framework will result, covered with poorly developed muscle (or lean meat)." I will not go into the question of whether the same thing is true of human beings, but it just occurs to me that there may be something here for the reformer, the patriot and, perhaps, the satirist.

H. E. BATES.